

MUSEUM WORK FOR PARTIALLY AND
TOTALLY BLIND CHILDREN

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

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The real objects found only in a natural history museum are invaluable in showing the changing life of the ages and the varied people of the earth. Although the printed page and picture may stir the imagination greatly, the seeing and handling of actual specimens is a far more vivid experience. Therefore in the teaching of nature study, geography, and history, museum material is becoming more and more widely used, either in class work at the Museum itself or in the school room.

The child with normal eyes is delighted with the sight and touch of an Indian war bonnet, the feather of a bird, or a strange animal of the past; what then must this experience be to the child whose impaired vision limits his world to an extent which the average normal person finds hard to realize? "Yes", proudly answered one little partially blind girl when asked if she had seen an insect and knew its name, "I know an insect. It is called a cow!" Thereupon came forth other "insects" ranging from earthworms to bats. For such children as these, real objects in the study of natural history are priceless.

At the American Museum of Natural History work with the children of defective vision has been for many years one of the established activities of the Department of Education. Several types of service are included, all grouped into two classes: first instruction in the Museum, second material sent to the schools. In cooperation with the Board of Education, regularly scheduled talks are given to the public school children; specially requested talks and Museum trips are arranged for private organizations like the New York Institute for the Blind, Yonkers Home for Jewish Blind, and other similar schools. When requested, nature study material is sent to the schools themselves.

The class instruction for the public schools is probably the most important and far-reaching of the Museum's work with those of impaired eyesight. In New York City such children attend the regular schools, but are grouped for individual instruction into special classes; in the blind classes are boys and girls whose sight is nearly or totally lost, and in the sight conservation classes are children whose eyes show varying degrees of defectiveness; a few are nearly normal but many are quite subnormal. Most of the classes with which the Museum deals are of the latter type, the sight conservation classes, although several of the blind classes visit us during the year; the difficulties of travelling limit the totally blind.

Every spring and autumn the Department of Public Education of the Museum, in cooperation with the Director of the Blind and Sight Conservation Classes of the New York City Public Schools, makes out a list of ten talks correlating with the curriculum and related to natural history, geography, history, civics, and health. These topics, with a brief outline of the subject matter of each, are sent to the individual teachers, who choose the subjects in which they are most interested. A final schedule of dates is then given the teacher, who with her class visits the Museum on the days specified.

At the Museum the children go into one of the class rooms in the School Service Building, where a Museum instructor takes charge. Let us suppose that the class has come for a lesson on birds. Several different phases of bird life may be touched upon, although probably only one will be considered very much, for the lessons are made as simple as possible. Bird travel may be one subject. The children will be shown and allowed to handle the common birds that pass through this region on their spring and autumn migrations. They will closely examine the feather of the bird to see how it

is fitted for flight. Perhaps they may be taken into one of the exhibition halls where birds like the wild goose and duck are mounted in their typical formation against a ceiling painted like the sunlit sky.

A popular spring subject is "Bird Homes". In this lesson the children become acquainted, among other things, with the tiny, lichen-covered nest of the ruby-throated humming bird, and the nest of the oven bird built on the ground and roofed over like a Dutch oven. With the boys and girls the instructor talks over the different methods of nest building, the care of the baby birds, their food, etc. Throughout the whole lesson the children are given every chance to see and handle the material.

Other nature subjects are included in the list of topics given. Lessons on mammalian life are illustrated by mounted specimens of the common mammals like the bear, the squirrel, the chipmunk, etc. Live material is also used. One of the most popular early spring topics is the study of frogs and toads. The children see the mass of frog's eggs covered with its protective jelly; they eagerly watch it for any signs of wiggling tadpole life and finally gather about the instructor, who holds an adult frog or toad (usually showing both separately), to watch and feel its breathing, learn how it uses its eyes, examine its webbed feet, its long hind legs, and its egg-shaped body so well adapted for swimming. At the end of the hour the children usually feel that these little animals are their friends; and often a little girl, who has previously expressed a decided dislike of the frog, cautiously strokes it exclaiming, "How soft and nice!" Again the boys and girls may study real turtles or may watch a goldfish swim, breath, and eat, from this familiar pet learning much about the life and habits of fish in general. In our nature work we usually include a visit to Central Park to

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learn how Mother Nature prepares her plant and animal babies for the winter or how she wakes them up in the spring.

It may be that the boys and girls have come to learn about other lands and peoples. They may handle a beaded Indian dress or a cradle board; they may pretend to eat from a birch bark dish or go hunting with bows and arrows. Travelling in imagination farther from home, they may touch cocoanuts and cloth from the Phillipines, may peep inside a Lapland hut, or may feel the softness of a silk cocoon and follow the steps in its transformation into a piece of silk cloth.

From the foregoing illustrations it will be seen that instruction is carried on as far as possible by explaining and examining actual material rather than by giving formal lectures. Although the blackboard and pictures, and occasionally slides and motion pictures are used, the main emphasis is laid upon the examination of real objects. This instruction, which is very individual, necessitates a small group; indeed most of the classes number about ten pupils, sometimes all of about the same age but often ranging from children six or seven years of age to boys and girls in their early teens. The subjects are made as simple as possible, a few rather than many points being considered.

Besides the regular class work special talks and Museum trips are arranged for the totally blind in public schools and several private institutes. Nature subjects are the most popular for these groups. The pupils are given every opportunity to feel and become acquainted with specimens in the classroom and are then sometimes taken to the exhibition halls where they are often allowed to touch the exhibited specimens; the Museum instructor gives a detailed description of the objects, including wherever possible a comparison with familiar things. It is almost tragic to see the eagerness with which

these children learn of the world about them, perhaps gaining an idea of the fish by handling a mounted specimen, discovering with surprise its eyes and fins, and finding much delight in judging the size of an elephant, mastodon, or dinosaur by touching its trunk or head and then its tail. During the spring of 1929 the Museum arranged for special visits and paid the bus fare of six of the eight blind classes in the public schools of Greater New York. The quick responsiveness of these children makes the work with the totally blind particularly satisfying.

Besides the class work with the children of defective vision a great deal of nature material such as mammals, birds, shells, crabs, etc., is sent directly to the schools. One of the most valuable kinds of material is the large relief globes on which the continents, mountains, etc., are raised, the rivers depressed, and the coast lines sanded so that fingers may learn what eyes cannot see. Nearly every school where there is a blind or a sight conservation class is furnished with one of these globes, which the teachers report as invaluable in their geography teaching.

The Department of Education feels that statistics are no real measure of the value of this work; that is to be found in the faces of the boys and girls as they learn more of the world around them and in the smiling recognition they give to the Museum instructors whom they visit from term to term. However, it may be interesting to know that, during the year 1928, 3,145 children attended classes here, while for the spring of 1929 alone, 2,107 came to the Museum for lessons.

~~Nancy A. True~~

~~American Museum of Natural History~~

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